How and When Was the Methodist Church Founded?

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Methodist Church history traces back to the early 1700s, where it developed in England as a result of the teachings of John Wesley. Even though he is named co-founder of Methodism, Wesley remained a member of the Church of England until his death and never wished to form a denomination separate from the Anglican Church.

Methodist Co-Founders: Charles and John Wesley

John Wesley (June 28, 1703 - February 24, 1791) and his brother Charles were born into a strong Anglican home. His father, Samuel, was a priest, and his mother, Susanna, was a religion teacher who faithfully taught the Bible to her 19 children.

While studying at Oxford University in England, John, Charles, and several other students formed a Christian group devoted to Bible study, prayer, and helping the underprivileged. They were labeled "Methodists" as a term of criticism from fellow students because of the orderly way they used rules and methods to go about their religious affairs. But the group happily embraced the name as a badge of honor.

The beginning of Methodism as a popular revival movement began in 1738. After returning to England from America, Wesley was bitter, disillusioned and spiritually low. He shared his inner struggles with a Moravian, Peter Boehler, who greatly influenced John and his brother Charles to undertake evangelistic preaching with an emphasis on conversion and holiness.

Although both Wesley brothers were ordained ministers of the Church of England, they were barred from speaking in most of its pulpits because of their evangelistic methods. They preached in homes, farmhouses, barns, open fields, and wherever they found an audience.

Of this time, Wesley wrote:

> "I look upon the world as my parish. Thus far, I mean, that in whatever

> part I am in, I judge it meet, right, and my bounden duty to declare unto all that are willing to hear the glad tidings of salvation."

The Influence of George Whitefield on Methodism

Around this time, Wesley was invited to join the evangelism ministry of George Whitefield (1714-1770), a fellow preacher and minister in the Church of England.

Whitefield, also one of the initial leaders of the Methodist movement, is believed by some to have had more of an influence on the founding of Methodism than John Wesley. Whitefield, famous for his part in the Great Awakening movement in America, also preached outdoors, something unheard of at the time. But as a follower of John Calvin, Whitefield parted ways with Wesley over the doctrine of predestination.

Methodism Breaks Away From the Church of England

Wesley did not set out to create a new church but instead began several small faith-restoration groups within the Anglican church called the United Societies. Soon, however, Methodism spread and eventually became its own separate religion when the first conference was held in 1744. By 1787, Wesley was required to register his preachers as non-Anglicans. He, however, remained an Anglican to his death.

Wesley saw great opportunities for preaching the gospel outside of England. He ordained two lay preachers to serve in the newly independent United States of America and named George Coke as superintendent in that country. Meanwhile, he continued to preach throughout the British Isles.

Wesley's strict discipline and persistent work ethic served him well as a preacher, evangelist, and church organizer. Inexhaustible, he pushed on through rainstorms and blizzards, preaching more than 40,000 sermons in his lifetime. He was still preaching at age 88, just a few days before he died in 1791.

Methodism in America

Several divisions and schisms occurred throughout the history of Methodism in America.

In 1939, the three branches of American Methodism (the Methodist Protestant Church, the Methodist Episcopal Church, and the Methodist Episcopal Church, South) came to an agreement to reunite under one name, the Methodist Church.

The Methodist Church prospered on its own for the next 29 years, as did the newly reunited Evangelical United Brethren Church. In 1968, bishops of the two churches took the necessary steps to combine their churches into what has become the second largest Protestant denomination in America, The United Methodist Church. Today, the total number of Methodists in the world is estimated to be more than 75 million.

Sources

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- "*John and Charles Wesley Experience Conversions.*" *Christian History Magazine-Issue 28: The 100 Most Important Events in Church History.*
- "*John Wesley.*" *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church (3rd ed. rev., p. 1739).*

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